

EPISCOPAL DIVINITY SCHOOL

Thesis

PRACTICING FOR THE JOURNEY: SPIRITUAL PRACTICES AND SPIRITUAL
LIFE CHAPLAINCY IN A SECULAR UNIVERSITY

BY

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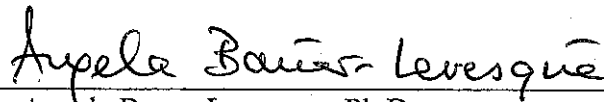
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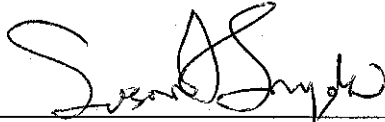
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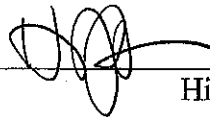
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PRACTICING FOR THE JOURNEY: SPIRITUAL PRACTICES AND SPIRITUAL LIFE CHAPLAINCY IN A SECULAR UNIVERSITY

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In this thesis I explore how support for the spiritual development of students in secular colleges and universities is evolving, particularly in response to the increased diversity of the student population and the rising numbers of religiously unaffiliated students, many of whom are disinterested in, even hostile to, religion. To serve this population, some chaplains are shifting their primary focus to interfaith dialog, service to others, and the exploration of questions of meaning and value. In parallel, developmental psychologists and educators increasingly recognize the need to support student spiritual development. Many envision secular institutions transformed into those where such support is part of the fabric of student life, but focus solely on faculty and staff as the agents of that change. Based on information from publications and interviews, I find that neither chaplains nor the Academy pay much attention to spiritual practice in this context. However, my experience in two years in a pilot program as a Spiritual Life Resource Assistant at Lesley University indicates that students are deeply appreciative of opportunities for both individual and communal spiritual practices. I argue that a spiritual life chaplain is uniquely qualified to be an agent of change in transforming a university from secularized institution to one that is fully supportive of student spiritual development, and that spiritual practices play an important role in that transformation.

To the students of Lesley University

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INTRODUCTION

In late April of 2011 the Director of Field Education at the Episcopal Divinity School (EDS) sent out an email announcing a joint EDS/Lesley University pilot placement to support the spiritual life of Lesley students. Lesley had not had a chaplain or any other individual with this specific area of responsibility for approximately 10 years. On opening the attachment I read:

The Spiritual Life Resource Assistant (a full-time student in good academic and conduct standing) will work with members of the Student Life and Academic Development Staff as a resource to all Lesley students. This is a pilot initiative that will last through the 2011-2012 academic year. In addition to regular, on-going assessment of the pilot, at the end of the year, the Dean of Student Life and staff will assess the year and make a determination about whether to extend the program should continue [sic]. As the goal of the pilot is to determine the desire for, and impact of, such a resource on the Lesley student experience, we will also provide specific opportunities for the Field Education student to learn how to function on a University campus.

I felt no sense of vocation for university chaplaincy as I then understood it.

However, in my life before EDS I worked as a consultant, and I continued to love the challenge of going into a new environment, discovering needs, building relationships, and creating the conditions in which to implement a project successfully. Furthermore, EDS's relationship with Lesley University was in its early phases, and I thought that the pilot would be a way to create further ties between the two institutions.¹ Finally, I was extraordinarily drawn to the opportunity. I was not in the ordination process and was

¹ EDS began a partnership with Lesley University in 2008 that included sale of some buildings, shared use of facilities including library and dining hall, and collaboration on academic programs.

trying to discern my calling, and this seemed to be a path I should explore. Therefore, I decided to apply for the position, and I was accepted.

My biggest fear was that at 57 and with no children of my own to have given me experience, I would be unable to build relationships with the students. That fear was unfounded. I had planned to spend the first semester focusing on infrastructure. Instead, I moved into offering programs more quickly than I or my supervisor had expected. I evolved a focus on dealing with change, and began to think about how to offer experiences that would give students spiritual competencies in navigating a rapidly changing world. I was invited back for a second year. While sitting with the labyrinth I installed in May of 2012, I experienced a deep sense of certainty that I was doing exactly what I was supposed to be doing, and I accepted the invitation to return. I was curious to place this pilot program in the context of current thinking about supporting student spiritual development, and began to read and to interview other chaplains in the area. This thesis evolved out of that research as well as my experience at Lesley.

In this thesis I will review the changing academic position toward spiritual life in secular (religiously unaffiliated) universities² in the United States, and new trends in supporting student spiritual development. I will then tell the story of my two years at Lesley. Finally I will offer a vision for how a Spiritual Life chaplain might be a change agent in a university moving from secularized institution to one that is fully supportive of student spiritual development.

² I use 'university' as an umbrella term for 2- and 4-year colleges, as well as those institutions that include multiple colleges and schools.

CHAPTER 1

SPIRITUAL LIFE IN THE SECULAR UNIVERSITY

A chaplain serves many roles, the expression of which will depend on the chaplaincy context and purpose. Paget and McCormack list the chaplain's general roles as pastor (one who provides spiritual care), intercessor (one who advocates for or builds relationships between), healer (one with concern for well-being of the whole person), and first and foremost 'minister' (one who officiates over religious activities).³ Stephen White includes a role mentioned by other sources as well, that of prophet (one who speaks God's truth and bears witness to God's love). That prophetic voice may in some cases be directed to the university administration itself. However, he too sees the role of 'priest' as central and says, "The chaplain's main public function is the leading of regular worship."⁴ Both say that the chaplain is also 'clergy' and denominationally appointed.

For me, this is a traditional university chaplaincy. However, as university chaplains have responded to concerns I discuss later in this chapter, some are shifting their primary focus away from worship in their tradition and toward functions that supports the spiritual development of all members of the community, such as interfaith dialog or social justice ministry. Chaplaincy with this shift in focus is what I am calling Spiritual Life chaplaincy. This is not a binary construct. The chaplain's focus will vary

³ Naomi K. Paget and Janet R. McCormack, *The Work of the Chaplain* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2006), 13-34.

⁴ Stephen L. White, *The College Chaplain: A Practical Guide to Campus Ministry* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2005), 45.

based on the institution's cultural context and specific needs. Nor do I suggest that Spiritual Life chaplaincy cannot include worship in various traditions. For example, a large secular university might have chaplains of many faiths on staff, under the direction of a Dean of Spiritual Life. I do suggest, however, that Spiritual Life chaplaincy focuses on the development of all students, even (or perhaps especially) those who may emphatically eschew religion.

While many Spiritual Life chaplains are ordained and appointed by their denomination, I am a lay Episcopalian and as such unlikely to be appointed by my Diocese as chaplain in a university setting. However, I have come to believe that my unaffiliated status may be an advantage, particularly in building relationships with members of the community who are suspicious of institutional religion. Although I name myself as chaplain in this thesis in order to place myself the context of an evolving ministry tradition, I would not have used the term at Lesley. I believe that the term is so closely identified with traditional chaplaincy that it would have created a barrier between me and those who are damaged by Christianity or who are unaffiliated with any tradition. However, it was not an issue. At Lesley I was a Spiritual Life Resource Assistant.

In having initially dropped the role of chaplain from the university structure, and in using the specifically non-religious language of "Spiritual Life Resource Assistant" for the pilot position, Lesley is situated squarely within a trend toward secularization in higher education. In this chapter I will discuss some of the cultural forces behind this trend and the resulting confusion around spirituality and religion. I will then review some

critiques of this secularization trend. I will conclude by exploring an area that I believe has been inadequately considered in these discussions, namely spiritual practices.

The Secularization of Higher Education in the United States

Secularization in this context means the gradual decrease of religion's influences in society and on the individual. This trend in the universities began in the 1960s in response to a perceived secularization trend in society as a whole:

Religion as a source of inspiration or insight concerning human life and thought was rejected, however, and when religion was studied it was typically treated as a natural phenomenon that was best explained reductionistically in terms of something else. ... By the late 1970s, religion as a matter of living faith and practice had essentially been bleached from the goals and purposes of higher education at the nation's major universities.⁵

Yet concern within the Academy around that "bleaching" is now arising on two fronts. The first front is the recognition that, far from diminishing, religion remains a vital force in modern society. As the Jacobsens say, "If secularization means that the world is getting a little less religious every day, then we live in a postsecular world."⁶ If universities behave as though secularization is continuing they are doing a disservice to their students who will have to live and work in a society permeated by religious influences. How, those concerned with this issue ask, should universities respond to this changing understanding of the role of religion in today's society?

⁵ Douglas Jacobsen and Rhonda Hustedt Jacobsen, "Postsecular America: A New Context for Higher Education," in *The American University in a Postsecular Age*, ed. Douglas Jacobsen and Rhonda Hustedt Jacobsen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 9-10.

⁶ Ibid., 10.

The second front is a concern among some developmental psychologists and educators that failure to support students' spiritual development does a disservice to the development of the whole person. Many are responding to studies that find, for example, that college students today are 40% less empathetic than those of 30 years ago, with the largest plunge being after 2000.⁷ Sharon Daloz Parks expresses two concerns, the first for the student "lost in a sea of ethical relativism," and the second in terms of leadership.

Emerging adulthood is a distinctively vital time for the formation of the kind of critically aware faith that undergirds the trust, agency, sense of belonging, respect, compassion, intelligence, and confidence required for citizenship and leadership in today's societies. And yet, if emerging adults and their potential mentors simply operate on the current default settings, the formation of self and society that is needed may not occur.⁸

How, those concerned with this issue ask, should universities support the spiritual development of their students?

Responding to these concerns is complicated by two trends in U.S. society outside the Academy. The first is an increasing tendency to polarize spirituality and religion. The language of religion has become charged with the nuances of fundamentalist political agendas. People increasingly refuse to discuss religion at all, for fear of entering into contentious discussions. Spirituality represents a safer option. The second is the increasing numbers of those who are religiously unaffiliated, many of whom identify as

⁷ Cited in Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Emerging Adults in their Search for Meaning, Purpose and Faith*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2011), 183.

⁸ Ibid., xi. Note that Parks has reframed 'faith' as *the activity of making-meaning in the most comprehensive dimensions of our awareness* (x). The language of meaning permeates much of the academic discourse on spiritual development.

spiritual but not religious. The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life calls these the “Nones,” a term I will use in this thesis. According to the Pew study, “Among the youngest Millennials ... fully one-third (34%) are religiously unaffiliated.”⁹ Robert Wuthnow found that “About half (55 percent) of 21- through 45-year olds are religiously uninvolved.”¹⁰ Victor Kazanjian, Dean of Spiritual Life at Wellesley College, says that “unaffiliated” is the fastest growing student population.¹¹ This represents a change from the early 1970s, as Wuthnow notes:

In the early 1970s, only about one young adult in eleven was religiously nonaffiliated and, as I noted previously, the nonaffiliates had generally been raised in a religious tradition. ... By the end of the 1990s, religious nonaffiliation was less an act of nonconformity than it had been a generation earlier. The proportion of young adults who were nonaffiliated had more than doubled. More had grown up nonaffiliated, meaning that fewer had made conscious decisions about being religiously unidentified.¹²

Both in order to speak to these students and to use a less contentious vocabulary than that of religion, many within the Academy many have begun to use a vocabulary of spirituality, although little consensus exists around the definition of terms. I will explore some of the most confusing concepts in the next section.

⁹ Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, “ ‘Nones’ on the Rise: One-in-five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation,” The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, October 9, 2012, <http://www.pewforum.org/Unaffiliated/nones-on-the-rise.aspx#growth> (accessed February 19, 2013).

¹⁰ Robert Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings are Shaping the Future of American Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 134.

¹¹ Victor Kazanjian, Dean of Spiritual Life, Wellesley College, interview by author, 20 August 2012, Wellesley, MA.

¹² Wuthnow, *Baby Boomers*, 86.

Confusing Concepts in Spirituality and Religion

Is Spirituality Solely Self-Centered?

At EDS individuals who were “spiritual but not religious” were often characterized as self-centered, solipsistic, people who practiced solely for the therapeutic value of making themselves feel better. This viewpoint is epitomized for me in Heelas and Woodhead’s study of spirituality and religion in Kendall, U.K. They suggested that religion “involves subordinating subjective life to the ‘higher’ authority of transcendent meaning, goodness and truth, while [spirituality] invokes the sacred in the cultivation of unique subjective life.”¹³ I found this binary characterization difficult to accept, as many people I knew who self-identified as spiritual but not religious guided their lives in response to a sense of ‘higher’ moral authority. I was therefore pleased to find that in the broader Academy and especially in the field of developmental psychology, spirituality is being framed as embracing a communal sense of outward relationship and service.

In 2012 Alexander Astin, Helen Astin, and Jennifer Lindholm of UCLA published the results of a five-year study of the spiritual growth of college students, the role college plays in facilitating their development, and the effects of positive spiritual growth during undergraduate years on traditional academic outcomes. Their definition of spirituality, as summarized in a subsequent work on practices, embraces this outward focus. The specific measures they evaluated are provided in parentheses:

Spirituality is a multifaceted quality that involves an active quest for the answers to life’s “big questions” (Spiritual Quest), a global worldview that transcends

¹³ Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 5.

ethnocentrism and egocentrism (Ecumenical Worldview), a sense of caring and compassion for others (Ethic of Caring) coupled with a lifestyle that includes service to others (Charitable Involvement) and a capacity to maintain one's sense of calm and centeredness, especially in times of stress (Equanimity).¹⁴

I would use language of social justice as well as service, and find the language of 'charitable involvement' to be a bit problematic, but this definition of spirituality, encompassing as it does both an inward focus (equanimity) and outward focus (connection with and care for others), is very close to my own. As Philip Sheldrake says, "[S]piritualities in all world religions, as well as secular forms, may be described as 'humanistic.' They aim to promote the development of such humane qualities as compassion, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, contentment, responsibility, harmony, and concern for our fellow human beings."¹⁵

Are Religions Unspiritual?

Certainly it may be possible to be spiritual but not religious. I argue however that to be religious without being spiritual is a hollow thing, built on externals. Again to quote Sheldrake, "all religions are fundamentally based on a spiritual vision." He continues:

The institutionalization of a religion tends to be a later fossilization of what began as a dynamic wisdom tradition. In that sense, many religious believers are also dissatisfied with institutional religion. However, this is not the same as a total separation of spirituality from religious beliefs or from a historically influential religious culture such as Christianity in western Europe.¹⁶

¹⁴Jennifer A. Lindholm, Melissa L. Millora, Leslie M. Schwartz, and Hannah Song Spinosa, *A Guidebook of Promising Practices: Facilitating College Students' Spiritual Development* (Regents of the University of California, 2011), 5.

¹⁵ Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 116.

¹⁶ Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality*, 99.

The Nones who reject Christianity may not only see it as a monolith owned by the Christian religious right, but may also only be seeing the institutional religion. Elizabeth Tisdell, who defines spirituality similarly to the authors of the UCLA study, uses the term the “political” parts of religion.

But religions are also organized communities of faith, usually with an official belief system, written creed, and codes of regulatory behavior, determined by those with the power and authority to do so. These are the political parts of religion that are not particularly related to spirituality, and this is probably what people are rejecting when they describe themselves as spiritual but not religious.¹⁷

Not only the Nones but also the religious may be focusing on those aspects as well. Diana Butler Bass tells the story of asking group after group of religious leaders to fill out a “spirituality” and “religion” word association chart. “No matter the group or the city, the words on the ‘religion’ side of the board were always about external things: *institutions, organizations, buildings, dogma, rules, hierarchy, order, and authority.*”¹⁸

I always identify myself at Lesley as Christian and Episcopalian, as I hope students will see in me the possibility of being both spiritual and religious. Because many think that all Christians are covert proselytizers, I also state my belief that there are many paths to spiritual growth, and that I will not try to persuade others to follow mine.

¹⁷ Elizabeth J. Tisdell, “Spirituality, Diversity, and Learner-Centered Teaching: A Generative Paradox” in *The American University in a Postsecular Age*, ed. Douglas Jacobsen and Rhonda Hustedt Jacobse. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 156.

¹⁸ Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012), 143.

What Do the “Unaffiliated” Believe?

Although the UCLA definition of spirituality is almost my own, for me it fails in one significant aspect. The authors include the characteristic “Feeling a sense of God/Higher Power that transcends my personal self” in measuring religiosity, by which they mean devotion to and practice in a specific faith tradition.¹⁹ To me, this correlation risks a simplistic view of the unaffiliated as uniformly atheist, secular humanist, or agnostic. Instead the Pew Research study found that the unaffiliated are a diverse group:

But one-third of the unaffiliated say religion is at least somewhat important in their lives. Two-thirds believe in God (though less than half say they are absolutely certain of God’s existence). And although a substantial minority of the unaffiliated consider themselves neither religious nor spiritual (42%), the majority describe themselves either as a religious person (18%) or as spiritual but not religious (37%).²⁰

This corresponds with my experience at Lesley. In the fall of 2012 I asked the 26 orientation leaders to say how they would identify themselves: were they religious, spiritual, atheist/agnostic, or anything else they wanted to say about their beliefs or practices. Only one identified with a religion (Christianity) without some sort of qualifier, and yet several specifically acknowledged some sense of transcendence, as in a relationship with the universe or a belief in more than what is physically here (see Appendix A for a complete list of responses). This complexity within the unaffiliated population means that those who work with students must be extremely careful in their

¹⁹ Alexander W. Astin, Helen S. Astin, and Jennifer A. Lindholm, *Cultivating the Spirit: How College Can Enhance Students’ Inner Lives* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 193.

²⁰ Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, “ ‘Nones’ on the Rise.”

use of language and in the assumptions they bring to dialog. Jenny Small, who has written an excellent guide to understanding college students' spirituality, writes:

The atheist and agnostic students also differed distinctly from the religious students when it came to defining spiritual. Although the Christian, Jewish, and Muslim students heavily defined spirituality as a connection to something greater [the atheist and agnostic students] tended to view spirituality as more of a grounded event having to do with one's mindset or way of life. They described spirituality as being self-reflective, as noticing or being aware, and as being outside the everyday.²¹

In this thesis, when I speak of spirituality I include what might minimalistically be described as a sense of something 'outside the everyday.' Sheldrake calls this the 'sacred' and says "This includes beliefs about God but also refers more broadly to the numinous, the depths of human existence, or the boundless mysteries of the cosmos."²² I will refer to this as a sense of transcendence.

Emerging Approaches to Supporting Spiritual Development

In a university environment that is still secularized, where institutional religion is viewed with suspicion, and that contains a growing number of 'Nones' of various types, specialists in a variety of disciplines are evolving ways in which to support students' spiritual development outside of any single religious framework. I see three major trends emerging. The first is providing forums for interfaith or intercultural encounters, discussions, and reflections, which I will combine under the heading 'dialogs across difference'. The second is through experiences of service to others. These two have

²¹ Jenny L. Small, *Understanding College Students' Spiritual Identities: Different Faiths, Varied Worldviews* (New York: Hampton Press, 2011), 156.

²² Sheldrake, *Spirituality*, 5.

already found significant expression in the ways university chaplaincies are restructuring themselves. At Northeastern University, for example, the organization that serves the spiritual/religious needs of students is now called the Center for Spirituality, Dialog, and Service. The third approach is through what are usually called Big Questions programs, in which students can explore, often with faculty or staff, questions of meaning: identity, morality, vocation, and belief.

The Practices Gap

While the evolving ideas of fostering the student spiritual development seems to be clustering around dialog across difference, service work, and ‘Big Questions’ programs, there is far less clarity around the role of spiritual practices. Spiritual practice, says Diana Butler Bass, “is the doing of faith. ... Practices are the things we do that shape who we are as they awaken us to God and others.”²³ In the context of the Nones, I suggest spiritual practices shape who we are, awaken us to others, and help us develop a sense of transcendence and discernment of the voice within us.

This is not to say that authors in the Academy ignore spiritual practice. Practices described as meditation or contemplative practices are routinely included as important to spiritual development. In discussing the contemplative mind Parks says, “Practices of contemplation encourage the cultivation of the inner life, honor the emerging inner authority of young adults, and confirm that they participate in a larger motion of life that

²³ Bass, *Christianity*, 145.

sometimes transcends their own efforts to manage and control it.”²⁴ Astin et al. find that, “One form of pedagogy that has so far been employed by very few higher education institutions is contemplative practice, such as meditation and self reflection. Our data suggest that these practices are among the most powerful tools at our disposal for enhancing students’ spiritual development.”²⁵ Other authors will occasionally offer specific suggestions, such as the regular use of Examen.²⁶ However, it appears to me that most of these authors associate practices other than generalized contemplative ones with religion, and therefore not to be touched. The UCLA study includes under Religious Engagement activities such as attending a class, workshop, or retreat on matters related to religion/spirituality, reading on religion/spirituality, religious singing/chanting, and prayer, as well as attending a religious service.²⁷ They see religious engagement as the practical expression of religious commitment; in other words the practitioner is practicing in his or her own tradition. However, in today’s pluralistic world students may perform any or all of these activities borrowed from a variety of traditions and may consider them spiritual practices, even though they do not affiliate with that tradition. But more than that, I believe that many students living outside any tradition hunger for practices that

²⁴ Parks, *Big Questions*, 189.

²⁵ Astin et al., *Cultivating the Spirit*, 156-157.

²⁶ Robert J. Nash and Michele C. Murray, *Helping College Students Find Purpose: The Campus Guide to Meaning Making* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 145. Examen is an Ignatian practice of reviewing one’s day in the context of the presence of God, used in the context of discernment. It has been widely rephrased and generalized.

²⁷ Astin et al., *Cultivating the Spirit*, 194-5.

offer them a sense of deeper connection or transcendence. In this I recognize that I am biased by my own context and spiritual development, for I too was once both a 'None' and also one with an intentional, God-oriented spiritual practice life.

Although I was baptized, confirmed, and married in the Episcopal Church, I did not come from a family that practiced their religion. In my childhood I had a number of brushes with Christianity, including a year as the only non-Catholic in a parochial school. They were not always positive. When I left for college I saw Christianity as an exclusionary, didactic, male-dominated religion, with no place for me as a woman or an intellectual, questioning being. While I could not embrace Christianity, quite early in life I acquired a belief in God the creator, and often experienced a sense of the presence of God in nature. Also quite early in life I developed a variety of disciplines that I would now call spiritual practices, rooted in an experience when I was about 12. As I was struggling with a decision, my father told me to draw two columns on a paper, and in one to write down the plusses and in the other the minuses of my decision. He then told me to put it aside, literally to sleep on it, and that the first thing I should do when I woke up was to "listen to my gut." What I heard would be my decision.

Although I soon abandoned the piece of paper, I continued to listen for an internal voice in what I now think of as a discernment practice, as listening for the voice of God. Perhaps in relation to that, I also developed a mindfulness practice of being alive to and as much as possible appreciative of the present rather than dwelling on the past or longing for the future. Finally I evolved a practice of offering frequent thanks to God. I have come to think I cultivated a habit of joy. I studied ethics in college, and devoted a

great deal of thought to the issues and challenges of living a moral life in my context. Thinking ethically itself became a practice. In living a life informed by these practices, I knew myself to be growing and developing as a spiritual being outside of the context of any religion, and I was deeply offended by those, particularly Christians, who suggested that my path was in some way invalid, or even sinful.

After many years I began to get the sense that I was stagnating spiritually. Informed by the experiences of my oldest friend, a founding member of St. Gregory of Nyssa in San Francisco, I began to worship at my local Episcopal church. The disciplines associated with active membership in a faith community, the leadership experience in the context of halting the disintegration of a troubled church, and the power of communal Eucharistic worship were formational, and brought me to EDS.

While I became convinced of the importance of belonging to a community of practice, I was confused by what I saw as an almost overriding emphasis on the practice of Sunday worship. I saw little in the way of support for daily spiritual practices such as those I had taught myself. As I moved through seminary I began increasingly to focus on how Christians could live a God-centered life, a holy life, every day. I began to consider the need for both individual and family or communal practices in addition to Sunday worship. I became intrigued by communities that created rules of life even though the members did not live together. My experiences at Lesley, specifically the response of the students to the activities I offered, caused me to apply that thinking to a university environment. I will describe these experiences in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 2

SPIRITUAL LIFE CHAPLAINCY AT LESLEY UNIVERSITY

My time at Lesley has been one of tremendous challenge and also of creativity. While not everything succeeded, for the most part what I have done has been affirmed by students with whom I have worked. In this chapter I will discuss the context of the pilot and the work I did in it, with a focus on opportunities for spiritual practice.

The Pilot Context and Scope

While I knew some of the tasks that would be expected of me, such as updating the list of local places of worship and creating a spiritual life webpage, I also knew that I was expected to find out what students wanted from a spiritual life staff position, or indeed whether they wanted such a position at all. As I had never worked at a university before, one of my first tasks was to learn more about the student environment at Lesley, and to build relationships with staff and faculty that would help me to understand what resources were already in place and what the perceived needs were at their level. This section describes the student environment, the relationships with staff and how they affected the scope of the pilot, and how I began to be in relationship with the students.

Student Life at Lesley

The pilot program was always centered on the undergraduate students and did not include ministering to graduate students, faculty or staff. At the beginning of the pilot my supervisor further reduced the scope to focus on the Cambridge campuses. Lesley has another undergraduate institution across the river, the Art Institute of Boston (AIB), but

the travel time alone would have eaten into the limited hours of the pilot. As I quickly found, even soliciting opinions from that more restricted group of undergraduate students about the pilot would be a challenge, as I somehow needed to communicate through the noise of the many competing demands students have on their time. Students are encouraged to form or join clubs or organizations, many of whose activities are open to the entire community. The Campus Activities Board sponsors movies, concerts, and other events. While Lesley is not a sports-centric environment, it does have sports teams, and students are encouraged to come out and support them. And, Lesley is located in an urban area with many bars, clubs, theaters, and other venues in which students can spend their spare time.

Student scheduling further complicates matters. Lesley has a large commuter student population, so many of the students are only on campus for class and those activities they want to attend. Lesley has a strong focus on experiential learning and all students are required to serve an internship in their area of interest. The Education programs, a particular strength of Lesley's, incorporate a one-day-a-week field education placement in the first three years, and a senior teaching practicum. Furthermore, many students work at part time jobs to help pay for their education. With the competing demands of classes, experiential learning, work, and many and varied options for extracurricular activities, it is extremely challenging just to make students aware of programs, much less attract them to coming. If six or eight students attend, in most cases that is considered a successful event.

Communicating about the Spiritual Life Resources Pilot

Major communications pathways with the students were the Activities Fair, email and Facebook, and simply being available.

Activities Fair

At the beginning of each semester the Office of Student Activities (OSA) sponsors an Activities Fair. Because my table at the Fair of September 2011 would be the first most students heard of the program, I put a considerable amount of thought into what I would do. I have a number of textiles from different parts of the world, and so I brought in scarves and material from Mexico, Spain, India, and Romania, hoping that the variety might convey an embrace of diversity. I made a printout with the symbols of the major world religions, and also printed the words Openness, Respect, Mutuality, and Diversity on individual sheets in different colored inks. I pinned the symbols and words to the drapery in front of the table.

I brought in my singing bowl, which turned out to be a very successful conversation starter, as a number of students asked to make it ‘sing’.²⁸ Based on an experience I’d had in one of my baptismal ministry classes at EDS, I printed a number of quotes about the challenges and joys of change and new beginnings, cut them into individual strips of paper, folded them up and piled them into another bowl. I also had a small bowl of chocolates and a clipboard to sign up for a Spiritual Life email list.

As students went by, if they even slowed momentarily I invited them to draw a quote and have a chocolate. If they stopped, I’d introduce myself, explain about the pilot,

²⁸ A singing bowl is a form of standing, as opposed to hanging, gong.

and invite them to sign up for the mailing list for further discussion of what the pilot might be. At the end of two or three hours 45 people had signed up and I had had several deeper conversations with students in other clubs, in particular with Hannah, who was forming a meditation club, and Alex, who was at the time one of the co-leaders of Hillel.

After the first fair I tried inviting everyone who had signed up to a discussion on what Spiritual Life Resources might offer. No one came. I also tried to get some ideas about student interest by expanding the signup sheet for later fairs to include columns for interests. For example, in the Fall of 2012 I included the topics meditation and reflection, learning about other religions, and exploring big questions. However, most of the students checked all three, so that was not particularly helpful.

In subsequent Activities Fairs I continued to use the diverse draperies, the quotes, the chocolates, and the singing bowl. In general I acquired 30-40 signatures at each of the four Activities Fairs, and in each also had conversations with some students that almost always resulted in some form of collaboration or further discussion.

Email and Facebook

As well as the emailing the students who signed up at the activities fairs, I acquired an additional avenue of communication in spring 2012 when I created a Facebook page for 'Lesley Spirituallife,' and I acquired a number of Facebook friends who were not on the email list. I posted fairly frequently, with distribution restricted to friends and thus to the Lesley community, both to advertise programs and events and to post quotes and pictures and occasional personal reflections or updates.

Because I believe that engagement with local and global events is critical to acquiring a sense of global citizenship, I offered opportunities on Facebook to respond from an interfaith perspective around the killings at the consulate in Benghazi (9/11/12), and participated in discussions as well as offering a Facebook “vigil” (in addition to advertising a physical vigil at EDS) in response to the Sandy Hook school shooting (12/14/12). In Spring of 2013 I explored Facebook as a venue in which students could consider the questions in the Life Questions program. Facebook is in many ways much better than email as a means of staying in relationship with students, and offers a non-threatening way for a student to begin to explore what this ‘spiritual life thing’ is all about. For me, though, Facebook and other electronic forms of communication can complement, but do not substitute for, opportunities for participatory events and conversations.

Availability

Finally, I was open to communication simply through being available. In 2011-2012 I had office hours in the Women’s Center one morning a week from 9:00 to 1:00. I used a whiteboard easel outside the space to advertise my presence, and was visible to anyone coming to the cafeteria to eat lunch. During that year I had two drop-ins. In the spring of 2012, in an interview with Dean of Student Life Nathaniel Mays about his own chaplaincy experiences, he mentioned that he had more conversations with students while

building sets for theater productions than during office hours.²⁹ As a result of that comment, in the second year I changed my location and hours to the student center one afternoon a week. The change was remarkable. I had more conversations my first week than in the entire previous year. The number and length of conversations increased in response to the Life Questions program in Spring of 2013, in part because I started decorating my table in the student center and students came over to ask what I was doing (see Appendix B, Figure 1). I also had the pleasure of casual hellos in passing, of beginning to feel an accepted part of the Lesley student community.

However, despite all of this communication and the generally positive response from students to the idea of having a staff person with a focus on spiritual life, I did not begin to get ideas about what resources the students might want until I began to provide programs or offer suggestions to which the students could respond. Instead, the scope of the pilot was first defined by an unexpected staff territorial issue.

Staff Interactions and Scope of the Pilot

When I began the program at Lesley, without knowing that I was following one of the primary trends in Spiritual Life chaplaincy, I thought that I would somehow focus my work in the area of interfaith dialog. It seemed to me that offering students the opportunities to acquire life skills in the often difficult conversations around religion and beliefs as they routinely affect our lives would be a good thing. Lesley had a Coordinator of Multicultural and Student Life services, and I was excited about working with him in

²⁹ Nathaniel Mays, Dean of Student Life and Academic Development at Lesley, formerly Protestant Chaplain at Brandeis (1989-2002), interview by author 29 March 2012, Cambridge, MA.

his programming. My general goal therefore read, “As part of ongoing discernment, to match my skills, passions, and sense of God’s call against the work of providing spiritual resources to an undergraduate population, and facilitating respectful conversations about spirituality, faith and religion in a multicultural/multifaith environment.”

Unfortunately, the Coordinator of Multicultural and Student Life Services wanted faith and religion to be part of his multicultural territory. It also became clear that there was little multicultural programming happening at Lesley at that time. Something of a crisis occurred when he showed up at a meeting with the small Christian Fellowship group. Any resource I offered, he offered. It had to have been very confusing for the students. This internal political conflict took up much of my first month of the pilot, and became a major distraction. I made one last attempt at collaboration when, in early October I was inspired with the idea for a celebration to be held during the January welcome week, as students returned to campus for spring term, called Welcome the Light. In my proposal to my supervisor I described it as “A celebration of change and new beginnings tied to the different ways cultures and religions approach the turn of the year, renewal of hope, and the coming of more light into our lives.” Unfortunately the Coordinator of Multicultural and Student Life was concerned that it would be a pagan celebration and chose not to participate. The event then evolved in a different direction, as described in section “Welcome the Light.” I continued to offer Lesley students opportunities to explore world religions through advertising local events and with more time would have continued to negotiate the situation. However, in the interests of

maximizing learning in other areas I abandoned any thought of developing programming around interfaith dialog myself.

Otherwise I formed productive and enjoyable working relationships with the members of the OSA, with the director of the Counseling Center and members of her staff, and with the director of International Student Services. All were uniformly supportive of the pilot, and I ended up collaborating in a variety of ways with them all. The collaborative relationship with the OSA staff became even closer in the second year of the pilot, when I began sharing one of their offices one afternoon a week.

In summary, by the end of the second month of the pilot I knew that my work would not focus on interfaith dialog, and I knew I was not going to get any direction other than general affirmation from the students. Before I started I had thought to experiment with offering regular meditation sessions, but that was unnecessary since a newly formed student-led Meditation Club was meeting weekly to practice a variety of types of meditation.³⁰ I was enjoying my interactions with students and was eager for more. I therefore began to offer activities as they occurred to me, to see how the students would respond.

³⁰ I became their faculty advisor, participated in their retreat in the spring of 2013, and club members collaborated with me on the labyrinth installations in 2012 and 2013.

An Evolving Focus on Spiritual Practice

As I began to offer activities to which the Lesley students could respond, I found that scheduled opportunities for group discussion were not attended at all,³¹ whereas opportunities that involved doing things were quite well attended, particularly if they could be structured in such a way that people could participate at different times depending on their schedule. Over the summer of 2012, as I reflected on what had worked well at Lesley in terms of programming, I began to think more and more about the importance of practice, of experiential learning, of the symbolic act. I came to see this as a particular service I could offer the Nones who might not have had experience with individual or communal spiritual practices as well as to those who were affiliated with a religion but might have not have learned much about everyday practices in their faith communities. The following sections describe the practice opportunities I offered and how they were received.

Practices of Discernment

While some students practice mindfulness or relaxation meditation techniques, I learned through meetings with the orientation leaders and work with the Meditation Club that fewer were exposed to practices that helped them to discern a direction or a sense of the transcendent in their lives. When I led a form of mindfulness listening meditation with the orientation leaders and asked for reactions afterwards, several said they had experienced the same or something like it before. When I led an abbreviated and

³¹ I did not take this personally. A student-led series of small group discussions in conjunction with the Life Questions program was not well attended either, despite commitments from the student's friends that they would attend.

generalized version of Examen, it appeared to be new to everyone. One student was extremely impressed with how powerful the exercise was, and several students agreed. I asked them to consider what it might mean to them if practiced regularly.³² I also led an object-focused combination of mindfulness and discernment as part of the Meditation Club's spring retreat. Those students who practiced mindfulness techniques were challenged by the discernment aspect of this, and wondered if it was perhaps too cerebral, which in turn offered an opportunity to explore the value of both forms of practice.

I included a variety of self-reflective exercises and questions in conjunction with the Life Questions program I began to develop in the second year of the pilot. The first question was "Who am I?" and I modeled the exercises on those in Wayne Muller's *How, Then, Shall We Live?: Four Simple Questions that Reveal the Beauty and Meaning of our Lives*.³³ For the second question, "Why Serve Others?," I took the approach of posting daily quotes and associated questions for consideration on Facebook for ten days leading up to the discussion.

Labyrinth

I installed a labyrinth as a way to prepare for finals in May of 2012, and at student request again in December 2012, and will have another installation in May of 2013. The Meditation Club co-sponsored the events and helped with setup and tear down. I did the

³² Even the mindfulness practice was not familiar to everyone. One student said afterwards that offering a variety of meditation techniques was one of the most valuable aspects of the orientation leaders training sessions.

³³ Wayne Muller, *How, Then, Shall We Live? Four Simple Questions That Reveal the Beauty and Meaning of Our Lives* (New York: Bantam, 1996), 24, 40.

first installation in part because as I looked at other university religion and spiritual life websites I saw that many of them offered labyrinths, and in part because of my own experiences in walking labyrinths in a number of contexts. I saw it not only as an opportunity to practice a form of meditation, but also a chance to see how students reacted to sacred space. While I did not attempt in any way to direct the students in the ‘right’ way to experience a labyrinth, I included in my description the discernment practice of bringing a question on the way in, listening for a response in the center, and then living with that response on the way out.

I borrowed a canvas labyrinth from Andover-Newton Theological School, and I used Alumni Hall for the installation. This is not only a large space but it is fairly easy to control the lighting, and it does not look like a classroom. Because it is almost impossible to get permission to burn candles at Lesley, I bought electric votive candles and we ringed the canvas with those and put chairs and meditation cushions around the canvas (see Appendix B, Figure 2). As people came to the space I or whoever was attending told them they were welcome to stay as long as they wanted. For music, I used CDs my spiritual director lent me that she uses in retreats.

Twenty-five people walked the labyrinth in May 2012 and, despite a poor advertising effort on my part, 15 in December 2012. I sat with the labyrinth both times, often with another student, and had deep debriefing conversations with two students who had very powerful experiences. In general the students treated the space as space apart more than I expected, to the point of taking their shoes off before entering Alumni Hall, not just before walking on the canvas. I invited but did not require written comments -

almost every participant commented and all were appreciative. Here is one of the most articulate:

So good to have this sacred space set in the middle of this college buzz. I slowed down into what is here and found amazing things. Answers come. Remembering. Feeling. So much energy in the center ... I felt it coming so powerfully ... the energy and love of the universe and also built through the attention and intention of all those who walked this shaped path... I took a nap after and let it all soak in. And when I woke up it was dark out, but there was still prayer and music and the held space was still around me. Such a gift. Thank you. Please continue this. Perhaps a space sacred and available for people to every-wander in and out of.

The labyrinth offered an opportunity for individual spiritual practice. The meditations I led with the orientation leaders were individual practices that merged into communal as the students debriefed together afterwards. The multi-day Welcome the Light event offered further permutations on individual and communal spiritual practice.

Welcome the Light

As I mentioned above, I had initially thought of Welcome the Light as a way of presenting different cultural approaches and religious practices around the celebration of change, loosely tied to the winter solstice. When this approach did not bear fruit, I turned to my theme for the 2011-2012 pilot year, managing change. I began to see the event as a time apart, a chance for students to notice and name not only ways in which they deal with change but to witness ways that others do so, and in part to do so in community. I have found that I deal with change better than many, and I thought I might try to use symbolic and performative acts to teach ways of dealing with change. I settled on three that were closely related to my own individual spiritual practices: addressing issues in the past that hold you back, naming with gratitude that which supports you moving forward,

and being present to the moment without dwelling on the past or focusing on the future. The event was held in January, during the first week of the Spring term.

For addressing issues in the past, I wanted a symbolic act of closure. In trying to think of some equivalent act to burning it occurred to me to use a paper shredder. I then realized that this could be set up over several days, which would allow students to engage in the act according to their own schedule. OSA rented a big shredder, which students later decorated (see Appendix B, Figure 3). I set up a poster inviting students to name what was holding them back, think about what they needed to do to move on, write it down and shred it.

For naming in gratitude what supports you moving forward, I repeated something I had done for Thanksgiving 2011. Based on my own experience with the power of giving thanks, I wanted to see how students responded to an opportunity to reflect on how the act of giving thanks affected them. I mounted white paper on a half wall in the student center, on which students could write or draw what they were thankful for. After a week it was fully inscribed, with a wonderful mix of heartfelt, funny, and often bawdy comments and drawings. For Welcome the Light I put up posters that linked the wall to the shredder and the third component, the upcoming celebration, and that invited students to name people or events that supported them during times of change (see Appendix B, Figure 4 and Figure 5).³⁴

³⁴ I had honestly expected that these walls would be trashed by rude or offensive graffiti and yet, perhaps out of a sense of respect for the context, that didn't happen. I think it surprised some of the students as well. As one said later, "You know guys, they'll draw a penis on anything - and no one drew any penises!"

As for the celebration itself, about being present to the moment of change, I invited the members of the a capella group Harmogeddon and the holistic life club Conscious Kinetics to collaborate and they got quite energized and involved. Central to the idea from the beginning was some sort of lighting ceremony, a literal moment of change from darkness to light. The representatives for Conscious Kinetics had the idea of doing a public art project using the shredded paper, to symbolize transformation and hope. That first year we draped two trees on the quad with lights and held the lighting ceremony outdoors. Harmogeddon sang three songs of their choosing, I made a short speech, and we lit the lights. Then everyone came back in, Harmogeddon spontaneously sang four more songs, while a few members of Conscious Kinetics did the art project. We served cocoa and cider and cookies. About 45 people attended.

Even before we had the event, people were talking about making it a tradition. For months after the event, students were asking if we were going to do it again in 2013, and so we did. The second year people wanted the same general approach to the event. I learned from experience and we did the lighting inside, with lights draped from the balcony in the student center (see Appendix B, Figure 7). Conscious Kinetics had a number of ideas early on but fell back on the public art project with the shredded paper. However, they too learned and did a much better job inviting everyone to contribute in some way to the art project. The result was a bit less designed than the first one (see Appendix B, Figure 6).³⁵ Despite the bitter cold that night, more than 40 attended.

³⁵ We had the previous year's art up as well, and one student said, consideringly, "Ours is much more diverse."

My biggest challenge was not knowing until the very last minute if Harmogeddon was going to sing. Because of this, I was not able to plan the event with the students as much as I would have liked. I considered and rejected ideas for pre-recorded music, and instead selected poetry that I thought students might read. In the end Harmogeddon sang, but only two songs, so I included one poem. The event's structure was:

1. Song, which turned out to be "Naked as We Came" - Iron and Wine
2. Introduction from me about what we were doing and why, emphasizing the importance of recognizing and naming, with invitation to the shredder and the wall to bring past and future together in the present
3. Introduction from a member of Conscious Kinetics about the community art project
4. Poem - last part of Mary Oliver's "Blackwater Woods"
5. Lighting lead in and lighting - "In the midst of darkness comes the light. Name it. Be present to it. Welcome the light!"
6. Song, which turned out to be "Lonesome Road" - James Taylor
7. Transition invitation to food and art project

Despite one noisy student in the back of the student center who was not there for the event, for me the second year was much more effective as a ritual - it had more flow to it, and felt more intentional. We were able to dim the lights in the front of the student center and the lighting itself was more dramatic.

The first year I did not have much one-on-one conversation with students, but a number of other staff members were there and did. Two told me of profound emotional responses by students to the lighting ceremony on the quad. My main criterion of "success" that first year was the fact that several students who had been at the first event came up to my table at the Activities Fair the day after and signed up for the mailing list, as well as the number who asked for it again. The second year I was the only staff member present and talked with more people. Different students appreciated different

things. Two told me how much they appreciated the shredder idea, and being reminded that they could not simply ignore issues but had to act on them to resolve them. One said how reading the wall put her in mind of things that supported her that she did not necessarily always think of or appreciate. Three or four just thanked me in general for providing an opportunity to do “something other than just party mindlessly.” One member of Harmogeddon said that she teared up at the poem (as did another member, who then qualified it by saying they were in general an emotional group and teared up pretty easily). A number of other students also said how much they loved Mary Oliver’s poetry.

Students continued to tell me how much the event meant. One was deeply appreciative of the opportunity to celebrate what she saw as an important moment, that moment of change, of new beginnings. While I had thought of the wall and the shredder in terms of offering the students a chance to perform symbolic acts regardless of the constraints of their schedules, she appreciated that I provided “multiple entry points” so that students could engage in different ways. She said that she and her friends held their own celebration around the act of shredding and it was meaningful for them, while other students might find writing on the wall more meaningful. Several faculty and staff mentioned the effect on them of reading the wall. It increasingly seems to me that in introducing the communal Welcome the Light celebration I opened a door to something far more powerful or meaningful to some of the students than I had ever anticipated. I will reflect on this in more detail in the next chapter.

Concerns

Although I continue to experiment with “drop-in” times for discussion as part of the Life Questions pilot, I do not yet know if it will be possible to have group discussions around issues of belief or meaning that are open to anyone. I am getting a sense that, while students will publish a restricted view of their interior lives to the general public, they are hesitant to, as one student said, “say what I believe in front of people I don’t know.” Despite the difficulties in scheduling, it may be necessary to develop small groups who have agreed to a code of conduct before significant dialog can take place.

Discernment practices and group rituals can trigger profound reactions, and I initially worried about introducing these in an environment where I was not in an ongoing relationship with the participants. I have made it my own practice to be available both at events (for example immediately outside the labyrinth room) and on a regular basis for drop-in discussion. I suggested that students doing any kind of discernment practices do them with a friend, so that they have someone to debrief with. Finally, I let the Counseling Center know what I was doing, so that they could be alert to possible repercussions. While I remain cautious, I came to realize that the risks are no greater than those imposed by offering a worship service without knowing who is attending or how it might affect them. Also, the Lesley students are quite adept at supporting each other as needed. And it appears that the benefits have far outweighed the risks. In the following chapter I will combine what I learned from the pilot along with what I learned in reading and interviews into a vision for Spiritual Life chaplaincy for the future.

CHAPTER 3

THE SPIRITUAL LIFE CHAPLAIN AS AN AGENT OF CHANGE

That universities should adopt a more holistic approach to education, one that supports student spiritual development, is strongly confirmed by the results of the UCLA study. These show a direct correlation between growth in spiritual measures with improvement in traditional outcomes such as GPA, leadership skills, and satisfaction with the college experience.³⁶ A number of authors who advocate university support of students' spiritual development take this beyond implementing scattered changes to a vision of a new kind of university environment. Daloz Parks speaks of the university's potential if it recognizes itself as a "mentoring community serving the formation of meaning, purpose, and faith."³⁷ Nash and Murray envision a community where staff and faculty work together both inside and outside the classroom to create an environment for student meaning-making.³⁸ Jenny Small calls for "every type of campus professional to make changes in the environments around them, to make colleges and universities more inclusive and supportive, and to help students grow and relate with one another in positive manners."³⁹ Yet these visionaries do not mention a role for a chaplain.

³⁶ Astin et al., *Cultivating the Spirit*, 135-6.

³⁷ Parks, *Big Questions*, 204.

³⁸ Nash and Murray, *Helping College Students*.

³⁹ Small, *College Students' Spiritual Identities*, 160.

For example, when the designers of the UCLA study hosted a National Institute on Spirituality in Higher Education, both to share their results and to discuss “what efforts should or could be possible in the academy to enhance students’ spiritual development” they invited faculty and staff of 10 universities with no mention of any title that might correspond to a chaplaincy.⁴⁰ This oversight, if that is what it is, might be in part because most of these authors are faculty themselves and therefore likely to privilege the role of faculty. It might also be because they understand the traditional role of a chaplain, but not how it is evolving to focus primarily on spiritual development. I agree with authors who say that in order to transform a university a large number of faculty members have to be on board. However, these authors think that faculty will generate community transformation, and there I disagree. Some may provide the initial inspiration. For example, at Lesley one of the initiators of the pilot was Prof. Jared Kass, who has done considerable research on spiritual maturation and its role in the lives of individuals and communities.⁴¹ However, most faculty members have responsibilities of their own that prohibit them taking the longer-term role of systemic change agent. Others may be challenged by the idea that students’ spiritual life is in part their purview. A trained and educated Spiritual Life chaplain with experience in community transformation and adaptive leadership is ideally suited to be a change agent in the university context. This role for a Spiritual Life chaplain is not without precedent. Diana Chapman Walsh, then

⁴⁰ Astin et al., *Cultivating the Spirit*, 151.

⁴¹ Jared Kass, “Spiritual Maturation: A Developmental Resource for Resilience, Well Being, and Peace,” *Journal of Pedagogy, Pluralism and Practice* 12 (Summer 2007), 1-18.

President of Wellesley College, wrote of how Victor Kazanjian, Dean of Spiritual Life at Wellesley, transformed that institution.⁴²

In the following sections I will discuss some ways that a Spiritual Life chaplain might serve to transform a secularized university environment into one that is fully supportive of the spiritual development of its students, and the training and skills needed for this role. This is not an inclusive description of all of the functions of a Spiritual Life chaplain but rather those activities with the most transformative potential. These include enlisting faculty and staff support, weaving together and collaborating with existing initiatives, communicating with all segments of the community about the new initiatives and the responses to them, being a mentoring presence, and last but certainly not least, inspiring opportunities for both individual and communal spiritual practices.

Enlisting the Faculty and Staff

The Spiritual Life chaplain can clearly play a role in enlisting faculty and staff in the initiative to support the spiritual development of its students both inside and outside the classroom. For this to be successful, I believe that an M.Div., or the equivalent in another religious tradition, is required, both as a credential with the University and to ensure that the Spiritual Life chaplain is well grounded in his or her own faith tradition.⁴³

⁴² Diana Chapman Walsh, "Transforming Education: An Overview" in *Education as Transformation: Religious Pluralism, Spirituality, & a New Vision for Higher Education in America*, ed. Victor H. Kazanjian, Jr. and Peter L. Laurence (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), 11-12.

⁴³ This is also in line with the National Association of College and University Chaplains standards and guidelines for chaplaincy,

I also believe that additional experience in transforming community, perhaps as a community organizer or in another professional context, is essential.⁴⁴

Obviously the first step in enlisting faculty is to develop relationships, to find those who might be comfortable discussing ways in which they could help students make meaning in their lives. Once a core group is formed, a number of possibilities exist. One is to begin to offer informal discussion opportunities around issues of world religion, politics, and economics, so that students may better understand the global environment they will be living in after graduation. Another is to pilot a “Big Questions” program. If the pilot is in any way a success, the program could evolve into a thread that carries through orientation, leadership training, faculty-led discussions, and student-facilitated small group work. A Spiritual Life chaplain with the appropriate academic credentials could offer classes, alone or in collaboration with faculty, on topics such as Religion and Mysticism, Faith and Nature, or Spirituality and the Arts, which might be effective cross-over topics leading to discussions of faith and meaning-making.

Integration and Collaboration

Although universities may not be naming themselves as spiritually mentoring communities, it is likely that most have existing silos of support for spiritual development. At Lesley, holistic psychology programs and other education initiatives including Mindfulness Studies programs, some of the work in OSA and the Office of

<http://nacuc.wildapricot.org/Standards-and-Guidelines-of-NACUC> (accessed 30 April 2013).

⁴⁴ Victor Kazanjian says that experience as a community organizer is more important to him when looking for staff than graduate-level education (interview).

Community Service, and some of the Counseling Center services are directed to helping students develop spiritually, although the activities may not be so identified.⁴⁵ In such an environment, the Spiritual Life chaplain could at minimum help conceptually link these offerings and provide a cohesive view of the many aspects of support for spiritual growth already present.

The Spiritual Life chaplain should also find ways and spaces to facilitate collaboration with or participate in the events and programs of other groups and clubs to grow their spiritual component, rather than becoming a competing influence. In academic environments, perhaps more than most, people have carved out territories that must be respected and negotiated. This is also a matter of practical necessity. It clearly is not possible or even desirable for a single Spiritual Life chaplain to offer programs in all four areas of dialog across difference, service learning, Big Questions, and spiritual practices. It is, however, possible for the Spiritual Life chaplain to build collaborative relationships such that a clearly articulated spiritual component is present as part of other programs.

The Spiritual Life chaplain can also suggest new collaborative initiatives. In the area of service at Lesley, for example, a new organization called the Boston Interfaith Campus Coalition has started offering service opportunities for students from campuses in the Boston area, which opens the possibility of collaborating with the Office of Community Service as well as service-oriented student organizations. Other opportunities might exist in the area of residence life. Lesley and other residential universities offer

⁴⁵ I was interested to hear a student talking about a course that uses a “life coach” and that is focused on spiritual and physical wellbeing. I looked up the coach and it turns out she is a Unitarian Universalist youth minister.

residence-level programming. The Spiritual Life chaplain could offer programming options, such as creating personal sacred space or negotiating difficulties with roommates exacerbated by differences in belief systems. If the university does not already have one, the Spiritual Life chaplain might plant and foster the idea of forming a residence hall dedicated to students interested in engaging in conversations and life experiences of different cultures and religions.

Many universities offer service and experiential learning opportunities that involve travel and work or study in the context of some other culture. The Spiritual Life chaplain might become another staff member on such trips. A student recently reflected about the meaning for her of a high school service experience that included a daily morning Mass. While this type of single-tradition religious practice is not appropriate for a mixed group of students, the addition of discernment practices and group discussions could open the possibility for experiencing the transcendence of our essential unity and shared social responsibility as an integral part of these learning opportunities.

Communication

In order to transform community, communication is essential. The Spiritual Life chaplain should have excellent communication skills, and a desire to communicate across different stakeholders in the university. At minimum it will be critically important to solicit student responses to all new initiatives. Unless the students respond positively and their reaction is communicated to the broadest possible audience, the initiatives are unlikely to continue. A faculty/staff-level blog about what the Spiritual Life chaplain is doing and why, and what the student experience has been is just one idea. As faculty

members begin to move into participating in some initiatives, they too should have a forum in which to communicate their ideas and opinions. Perhaps even some structured live discussions with students could be created. As transformation continues, early proponents must be kept informed, even as new colleagues are enlisted.

The medium of communication is also important. Some of the most basic include a website of worship resources, and emails or a regular newsletter about events of spiritual or religious interest. Particularly in communicating with the students about new or collaborative initiatives, the Spiritual Life chaplain should also use the technologies the students use. While in the pilot program Facebook was the tool of choice, this will no doubt change in the near future.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the Spiritual Life chaplain should endeavor to create both a university-wide safe environment for conversation about the difficult issues of belief and meaning, and an accepted vocabulary with which that conversation should be conducted. One of the most effective practices at EDS is the use of the VISIONS guidelines in every class.⁴⁶ By reviewing the guidelines and soliciting changes and modifications, all members of the group are brought into a contract of behavior toward each other. Over time these guidelines become part of our conversational DNA. The Spiritual Life chaplain should inject such guidelines into the fabric of the university as much as possible, not only so that students and faculty can

⁴⁶ VISIONS, Inc. is a multicultural training and consulting organization that initiates a positive learning journey for people and groups to become catalysts for change.

have a standard of behavior but also so that students understand how to manage difficult conversations in their life after graduation.

I have already discussed the challenge of language around terms such as ‘spirituality’ and ‘religion’ (see Chapter 1, Confusing Concepts in Spirituality and Religion). The Spiritual Life chaplain needs to help faculty and staff understand the different ways in which people use these terms, and how that use is informed by their culture and faith tradition. The Spiritual Life chaplain can also facilitate the creation of a location-specific spiritual vocabulary, so that even though the meaning may not match the individual’s experience, in common conversation all have some shared idea of what is meant by spirituality, religion, transcendence, the sacred, and so on. It is important to be creative in using other resources to help to develop ways to approach some of these matters. Because many people are more comfortable with discussions of creativity and inspiration than they are of faith and transcendence, I am particularly interested in exploring resources such as Julia Cameron’s *The Artist’s Way*, and Robert Wuthnow’s *Creative Spirituality: The Way of the Artist*, more for suggestions on how to communicate about spiritual matters to faculty, staff and students. For example, Wuthnow’s discussion of the importance the artists profiled in his book place on the regularity of practice, and the integration of spirituality and work, are fruitful sources of framing a discussion that might otherwise dissipate in a sea of generalities.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Robert Wuthnow, *Creative Spirituality: The Way of the Artist* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 107-138.

A Mentoring Presence

The Spiritual Life chaplain will obviously need to be a mentor or a guide for individuals who wish to discuss their own spiritual journey. Unless also a trained counselor, the Spiritual Life chaplain should be sensitive to points where the best action is to guide the student to a counseling relationship. Participation in a Clinical and Pastoral Education course, perhaps as a hospital chaplain, would be useful experience. Mentoring in a university environment often means a single interaction rather than an ongoing relationship, and hospital chaplaincy trains in that model. Specific course work in spiritual direction would be useful, and experience working with a spiritual director is I believe essential. Kimberly Green of Bethany House of Prayer, my spiritual director, was generous with her experience in, for example, structuring a retreat as well as in suggesting resources that she has used in her work with young adults.⁴⁸ However, I also drew extensively on memories of ways in which she had held up a mirror to my own experience and allowed me to find meaning and direction in often confusing contexts. Had I not had that relationship to draw on, and without any kind of classroom education in spiritual direction, I would have often been at a loss on how to respond to student reactions to experiences such as walking the labyrinth.

The Spiritual Life chaplain can also provide mentorship in helping students, and perhaps even staff and faculty, acquire the ability to judge the value of different approaches to spirituality. As Sheldrake suggests:

⁴⁸ Kimberly Green, Spiritual Director at Bethany House of Prayer, interviews by author 25 February 2012 (on designing a retreat) and 13 June 2012 (on resources for university students), Arlington, MA.

[S]uch optional or eclectic spiritualities do not yet offer a framework or language to help us to tell the difference between constructive and unbalanced versions of ‘the sacred’ or the ‘divine’ and their implications for good or ill. Another serious issue is the degree to which a free-floating approach to spirituality is capable of challenging an uncritical or self-focused understanding of fulfillment, happiness, satisfaction, and self-enhancement. These desires are not wrong in themselves but, without criteria of judgement, they can too easily become self-regarding.⁴⁹

The Spiritual Life chaplain can both offer both general as well as religious and philosophical contexts of judgment. Discussing religion from this perspective may in turn help all members of the community acquire a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between religion and spirituality.

Another mentoring aspect of the role of the Spiritual Life chaplain could be to foreground the ethical aspects of becoming a force in students’ spiritual development. Nash and Murray are particularly concerned with this, and describe their concerns in the context of meaning making:

The seduction of manipulation, adulation, exploitation, and exaggeration are powerful. Because the academy has done little to encourage active meaning-making on college campuses, we have no precedent on how to proceed in this process without causing harm to ourselves and our students. For better or for worse, we will be making up this interactive ethic as we go along.⁵⁰

A Spiritual Life chaplain, already trained in the dangers inherent in spiritual leadership, could help facilitate conversations around ethics and offer suggestions for what such an “interactive ethic” might look like.

⁴⁹ Sheldrake, *Spirituality*, 99-100.

⁵⁰ Nash and Murray, *Helping College Students*, 161.

Spiritual Practices

Inspiring creative and contextually appropriate forms of individual and communal spiritual practice is an area where the Spiritual Life chaplain is likely to contribute the most. Such practices may themselves be transformative for the community and the individual. The impact may be greatest among the Nones, some of whom may never have experienced discernment practices or ceremonies that create liminal space or a path to experiencing the transcendent.

Sacred Space and Time

Some form of assigned sacred space is one of the most visible signs a university can offer that they support the spiritual development of their students. Based on the reactions to the Labyrinth installations, Lesley students are deeply appreciative of such initiatives. Not all institutions have the space to create a permanent meditation or ritual space. However, some years ago my imagination was caught by the story of a church in the Northeast Kingdom that had no building, and traveled to various locations with a cabinet containing their materials. The Spiritual Life chaplain could do something similar in terms of having a collection of art, hangings, and objects that would create a sense of sacred space and could be set up in a variety of locations.

Individual Practices

Many universities either offer times for meditation or have student organizations, such as the Lesley Meditation Club, that are focused on contemplative practices of various types. The Spiritual Life chaplain can ensure that students are offered opportunities for learning a variety of discernment practices along with the more common

mindfulness techniques. The Spiritual Life chaplain should be interdisciplinary in exploring possible practices. I plan to continue to research how new approaches to rules of life and practices rooted in faith traditions might be translated into more general terms (such as has been done with Examen), although with an eye to the dangers of cultural appropriation. I also hope to explore additional non-religious approaches. One of the artifacts of today's secularized environment is that people's need for rite and ritual is surfacing in surprising ways and places. Someone concerned with spiritual development in a university should always be attentive to possibilities outside the traditional. As well as offering a rich variety of possibilities for individual practice, the Spiritual Life chaplain should also speak to the importance of regular practice. While over time many of us will need to change our places, methods, and times of practice, some form of sustained commitment is essential for spiritual development.

The Spiritual Life chaplain can also facilitate a communal experience of individual practice, for example by offering group discussion opportunities after a time for an individual exercise, such as drawing a map of one's spiritual journey. While this can be difficult to schedule it is always worthwhile. It is noteworthy that after Meditation Club practices the students debrief together. One of the orientation leaders told me that she and some of her friends meditated at different times, but then discussed their experiences together on Facebook. Clearly students hunger for a sense of the communal around their spiritual practices.

Finally, the Spiritual Life chaplain can offer means for students to express themselves to the community. The collective display of public expressions such as the

wall during Welcome the Light can in turn be transformative as other members of the community read and reflect on them. Diana Butler Bass quotes Charles Taylor on the subject of what he calls ‘mutual display,’ “‘Here each individual or small group acts on its own,’ writes Taylor, ‘but aware that its display says something to the others, will be responded to by them, will help build a common mood or tone that will color everyone’s actions.’”⁵¹ The Spiritual Life chaplain may find that such activities are already taking place. For example, at Lesley the women’s group Third Wave had an activity in which people could paint T shirts with phrases or images around sexual abuse. They were hung in the student center for two weeks. The display was diverse and yet collectively set a tone that both condemned the abuse and affirmed the strength and courage of the survivors. It said something about the standards of the Lesley community as a whole. I believe these mutual displays are one of the most powerful tools available to help transform the university community.

Communal Rituals

Although public candlelight vigils and community-constructed memorials are becoming common in the face of disasters such as the Marathon bombings, in general the rituals that in some way form us as a spiritual community remain the province of institutional religion. In a society where increasing numbers of students are Nones, people may be living their lives with no experience participating in a communal spiritual ritual. Interestingly, of the authors that I read for this thesis who were writing outside a religious tradition, only Parks made reference to communal practice as she sketched out

⁵¹ Bass, *Christianity*, 256.

poetically but vaguely the categories of practice of the hearth, practice of the table, and practice of the commons.⁵² The Spiritual Life chaplain of a university that has become over time void of ritual can be alert to points, particularly points of transition, where contextual communal rites and rituals could be introduced.

In the spring of 2013 I had the great good fortune to be part of a directed reading seminar at EDS on ritual in an interfaith or secular environment. One of the earliest challenges was defining what we meant by ritual. Without going into detail on all the sources that contributed to this definition, I came to think of ritual as primarily a mode of paying attention. The object of that attention might, depending on context and need, be an interior voice, or an external such as a difference between what is and what ought to be. It is physical, a performance that transforms the everyday into an alternative framework in which the participants may understand themselves or the world in ways that envision and empower. To tie the language of ritual with the language of spirituality, to me an effective ritual is one that supports spiritual development by “paying attention” in a way that promotes in the participants an awareness of their context and a sense of connection with or responsibility to others, increases their capacity for equanimity, and/or creates a space and time in which they may experience a sense of transcendence.

Based on what I heard from students (described in the section on Welcome the Light in Chapter 2) Welcome the Light was an effective ritual. It caused some to pay attention to a moment of change and to the importance of the ways we deal with change. It caused some to consider a need to act on anger, guilt, or fear, particularly through

⁵² Parks, *Big Questions*, 198-199.

forgiveness. It caused some to name the debt they owed to others, and in doing so caused others to consider their own indebtedness. Implicit in that is our fundamental connected humanity. Finally, it created the space and time to experience a sense of transcendence, although whether any students did I have no way of knowing. The emotion expressed by some students can be a mark of such an experience, but does not equate to it. I do not have the scope in this thesis to explore the elements of Welcome the Light that I believe contributed to its efficacy, nor to discuss the ethical considerations of conducting communal ritual in an unritualized environment, but I look forward to doing additional work in this relatively undeveloped and I believe important area.

As well as developing contexts in which students can experience shared contextual ritual, the Spiritual Life chaplain might also offer a series of interpreted liturgies in a variety of religious traditions. I found my own experience of the Christian Eucharistic celebration transformed as I learned more about its essential structures and relationships. When I wrote an instructed Eucharist and we offered it at my church, a number of the congregants said their experience was transformed as well. Might students find the major religious traditions at least less alienating, if not more attractive, if they understood something of the spiritual heart of those traditions?

The Spiritual Year

Finally, the Spiritual Life chaplain can help restore to the students a sense of the movement of the year other than the academic calendar. Many students, both Nones and affiliated, find tremendous meaning in their relationships with nature. Tying practices and rituals to the time of year, as Welcome the Light was indirectly linked to the winter

solstice, can offer an additional layer of meaning as well as encouraging students to be attuned to the world around them.

Other programs supporting spiritual development can be interwoven into the academic year. Big Questions could be tied to other events on campus. We discussed “Why Serve Others?” in February because the student leadership participated in the National Day of Service in late January. Such intentional and contextual linkages would help imbue other programs with meaning beyond the scope of the event. The Spiritual Life chaplain could help to evolve a year-long cycle of both individual and communal practices and opportunities for conversation and shared activities, tied to the seasons and the events of the community.

Finally, it is important for the Spiritual Life chaplain to let the students take the lead without being in any way an intermediary between the community and its sense of spiritual life. Students at Lesley express themselves through art, dance, in words and in music. They know what resources are relevant in their context. The Spiritual Life chaplain should guide or suggest, but in the end should always let go.

Personal Reflection

When I entered the pilot field education placement, I was concerned that I was not qualified. I have come to believe that I am particularly well qualified. I truly believe in being the guide on the side, not the sage on the stage. Indeed, sometimes at Lesley I have wondered who is guiding whom. I am deeply impressed by the wisdom some of these students express and, while I hope that in some way I have formed some of them, I know that they have formed me. While I worried initially that I was too old, I have come to

wonder if being literally an “elder” taps into some archetypal understanding of a spiritual companion. More important than age is energy, enthusiasm, creativity, and willingness to learn, and I have those in abundance.

As I discussed in Chapter 1, I have come to believe my lack of denominational affiliation is an advantage when dealing with many of the Nones. I am concerned however that, without denominational authority behind me, it may be impossible for me to find work as a Spiritual Life chaplain. That would be a grief to me. When I entered the pilot I had no sense of vocation for university chaplaincy. This is still the case if I consider university chaplaincy in the traditional Christian sense. But Sheldrake says in his conclusion:

What follows from all this is that spirituality is fundamentally concerned with cultivating a spiritual life rather than with simply undertaking certain spiritual practices isolated from values and commitments. ... It seems to me that part of cultivating a spiritual life is actually to have the courage and ability to make our implicit beliefs and values more explicit and more balanced and then to live a principled and harmonious life more effectively.⁵³

To support university students, especially unaffiliated ones, as they cultivate their spiritual life, to help create an educational environment that is supportive as well - this is my vocation. This is my joy!

⁵³ Sheldrake, *Spirituality*, 120.

APPENDIX A: 2012-2013 LESLEY ORIENTATION LEADER SELF IDENTIFICATION

The following responses were created from notes in a meeting with the 2012-2013 Lesley Orientation Leaders. I asked them (if they felt comfortable responding) how they would identify themselves: were they religious, spiritual, atheist/agnostic, or anything else they wanted to say about their beliefs or practices.

- Christian.
- “I identify with the universe!”
- No identification, although liked the “identify with the universe” statement. “I dabble in practices.”
- More spiritual than religious.
- Not religious. I liked the response “I identify with the universe” and I’ll go with that.
- Raised RC but more spiritual.
- Catholic but not religious.
- Raised Jewish but likes the cultural aspects, the traditions and the home practices.
Would call herself a cultural Jew.
- Raised RC but didn’t like it at all. Is coming up with his own religion.
- Not sure. Not religious, even spiritually day by day. Star-gazing is a spiritual practice.
- Enjoys religion but does not identify. Leaning toward agnostic. Prays through music.
- Loose agnostic.

- Raised RC but has questions, does not worship.
- More spiritual than religious.
- Raised Jewish. Does not celebrate. Open to the cultural aspects.
- Raised RC but does not practice.
- Raised Protestant but cannot believe in a God that hates you; prays through music.
Believes there is more than just what is physically here.
- Raised RC. Now believes in a higher power.
- RC and Yogi.
- Doesn't know.
- Raised conservative Jewish. Follows some practices. Loves family rituals.
- Not religious. Raised Christian. Not even spiritual but she'll support a friend in their spiritual journey.
- Christian Presbyterian. Non-denominational.
- Raised RC but turned off to it.
- Raised Muslim but doesn't practice.
- Raised Jewish. Interested in "Where do I come from, why am I here?" questions.

APPENDIX B: PHOTOGRAPHS FROM THE PILOT



Figure 1. Student Center Spiritual Life “Office” - Life Questions Day



Figure 2. Labyrinth, May 2012

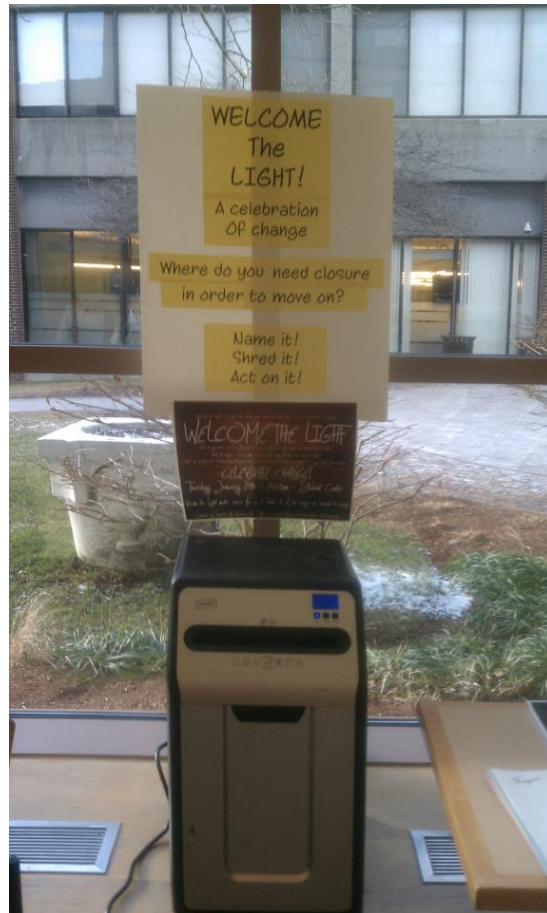


Figure 3. Welcome the Light Shredders, years 1 and 2



Figure 4. Welcome the Light Wall Invitation, Year 2

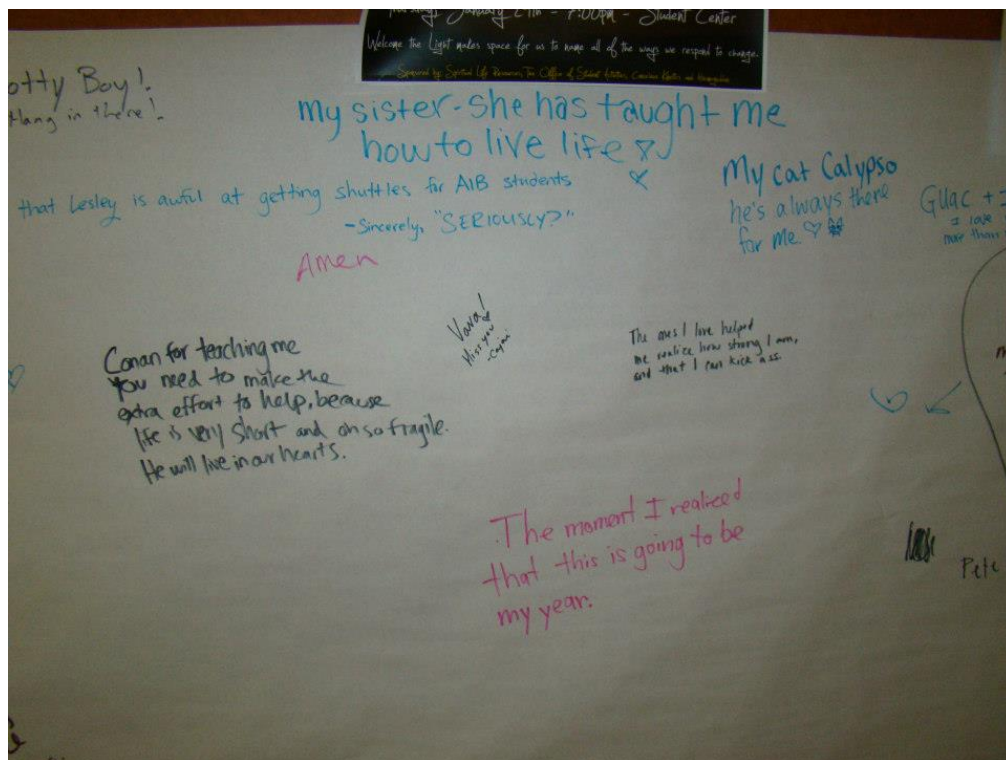


Figure 5. Part of Year 2 Welcome the Light Wall



Figure 6. Welcome the Light Public Art Project, Years 1 and 2



Figure 7. Welcome the Light Lighting Year 2

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